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PBS program to feature UM professor's research on fossil coral reef's fantastic voyage

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University of Montana

NEWS RELEASE

Office of News and Publications
Missoula, MT 59812
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June 11, 1991

PBS PROGRAM TO FEATURE UM PROFESSOR'S RESEARCH ON FOSSIL CORAL REEF'S FANTASTIC VOYAGE

MISSOULA --

For University of Montana paleontologist George Stanley, a trek high into the Wallowa Mountains of northeastern Oregon is also a journey across thousands of miles and millions of years to an ancient coral reef near Asia. This week, a public television crew will accompany Stanley into the mountains and back to UM, chronicling that geologic journey for a fall episode of "Nova."

The Wallowa Mountains are "a terrane, a geological entity that is completely separate from the rocks surrounding it," Stanley said. That separateness triggers controversy and questions about where the terrane came from, and Stanley has found clues in the mountains' wealth of fossilized coral, sponges and mollusks -- creatures that appear to hail from Europe or Asia, not North America.

As part of a "Nova" probe of the Wallowa mystery, the science program will follow the UM geology professor as he collects specimens in the mountains, boils away the surrounding rock with acid and examines the exposed fossils. After spending most of this week in the Wallowa-Hell's Canyon region with Stanley, a "Nova" production team will follow him back to Missoula to film sequences in his UM lab Friday, June 14.

Stanley believes the fossils he collects in Oregon originated

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more than 200 million years ago on a coral reef around a volcanic island near Asia and were conveyed thousands of miles through the process of plate tectonics. Like Noah's ark, he said, the island carried its colorful cargo of marine life across the ancient ocean, slowly transported by a spreading sea floor until it crashed into North America some 100 million years ago and was gradually enclosed by other additions to the continent.

He stressed that his account of the Wallowa terrane's origin is a theory, one he has developed over the past six years. Some scientists contend the marine creatures swam across the ancient Pacific on their own, he said, while others believe the terrane is a fragment of a lost continent named Pacifica.

The abundance of conflicting theories and the lack of a single, definite answer to the terrane question contributes to an exciting atmosphere of scientific sleuthing, he said.

"As a paleontologist, it's very exciting because you don't just study little fossils and identify them, you actually apply your work to a large-scale theory," Stanley said. "It's like a detective story--pieces of the puzzle that are falling together."

The "Nova" episode exploring that detective story is expected to air in September or October.

Editors: Stanley and the "Nova" team are expected to be at UM lab all day Friday, and the media are welcome to observe the filming. For more information, contact graduate assistant Suzanne Simpson, 243-5693, or administrative assistant Judy Fitzner, 243-5875. Stanley can be reached at 243-5693 on Friday.

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